

Chapter 1

THE TWILIGHT ZONE OF STATE LEADERS

John Wanna and Paul Williams

Premiers and chief ministers are strange beasts – neither fish nor fowl. They are ministers for everything, and for nothing in particular. They occupy a position for which there is no job description. They invent, shape and reinvent their jobs themselves. There are few constitutional roles or duties they must perform. Sometimes they are not even mentioned in state or territory constitutions – if their positions are mentioned, it is often *en passant*. They have been promoted into the top job in their jurisdiction, and as a consequence there is nowhere else for them to go. The premiership is often the last serious job they have. There is no security of tenure – they are removable not only by the electorate at periodic intervals, but instantaneously by colleagues and rivals anxious to take over. Occasionally they are ousted by ill-health (as Jim Bacon and Don Dunstan were), but very few have actually died in office (since World War II, only Joe Cahill, Ned Hanlon and Jack Pizzey have).¹ More frequently they are dragged down by political scandals or torpedoed by the electorate.

There are few formal powers premiers and chief ministers enjoy, but paradoxically, also few limits to their authority. Their roles and responsibilities have indistinct boundaries. They are responsible for everything done in the government's name, yet they can accept or off-load much of that responsibility. It falls to them to maintain an eye on winning the next election; this determines their short-term and longer-term longevity. They have *carte blanche* to enter whatever policy area they choose, but limited time and attention spans to oversee something for long. They have access to departments that no other minister has. They

can make decisions on personal whim or act spontaneously; they can commit the government to certain courses of action or make appointments to senior positions without the consent of their colleagues. They can choose to be highly involved in the detail of administration or totally dismissive of 'the detail'. But there are also legal and political constraints to their actions, and the ever-present scrutiny of the media, interest groups and the community.

Most noticeably, these chief ministers are the figureheads of their governments – the public face usually equated with their government. They are leaders of their own polity, big fish in a middle-sized pond. But they are not national leaders, as they are suspended between two other levels of government – local government and the Commonwealth. They generally control their own jurisdictional politics and are well known and highly visible, dominating the airwaves and media columns of capital city newspaper dailies. Yet they may be virtually unknown outside their milieu. They are parochial kings but cosmopolitan paupers. Few state leaders, after Federation, have made it in national politics. If they are known in foreign parts of Australia it is generally for something exceptional or bizarre. Don Dunstan was known outside his Athenian South Australia for wearing pink hotpants to parliament (something he did but once, and on a dare with his then partner). Neville Wran was known outside the bearpit of NSW politics for his teflon voice; Bob Askin for his bullying and reputed corruption; Joan Kirner for her rock-and-roll impromptu performances; Jeff Kennett for his quiff and 'jeff-off' manner; Joh Bjelke-Petersen for mangling the English language; and Peter Beattie is widely recognised outside Queensland only for his Cheshire cat grin. Jim Bacon was almost unrecognisable on the mainland until the flurry of media interest that occurred after his diagnosis with lung cancer early in 2004. Four months after his forced retirement from politics, Bacon succumbed to the disease. It's the odd things that resonate with us.

Premiers and chief ministers seem immensely powerful when in office – little tyrants in their own principalities. But once gone, they are quickly forgotten. Their political powers and reputations as fearsome dictators soon evaporate. The office retains the authority, and the new incumbent (even if considered a most unlikely prospect) soon adopts the mantle of power. Few Australians can ever name the predecessor of their current state or territory leader. Former premiers are thrown into the

dustbin of history like former prime ministers, and as a nation we do not really know what to 'do' with any of them. There is no chance of basking in post-office influence as Lee Kuan Yew, Deng Xiaoping or Nelson Mandela have done in their respective jurisdictions. We do not celebrate them or their period of leadership as Americans do – establishing libraries and providing subsequent important positions for them. In Australia, if they hang around or offer gratuitous advice they are only seen as getting in the way. It's a brutal end.

All our premiers and chief ministers inhabit this temporal twilight zone. Their positions defy precise description and their powers are contingent. They shoulder the burden of being at the centre of government, and accept the costs and benefits of notoriety. They know their grip on power is transitory and that once their time is over they will be suddenly surplus to requirements. They get pleasure from exercising power but eschew the scrutiny of external inquisitions. It is commonly believed that the buck starts and stops with them even if they themselves would on occasion prefer to think it lies elsewhere – Canberra is their most popular choice. Their day-to-day life in the job is full of uncertainty; instead of offering the assurance of a vocation or calling, their jobs seem only to offer perpetual risk. Every day has the potential to bring surprise and a crisis to be managed. It is a world of unreality, with few havens or roadmaps to assist them in their journey. As conservative British political theorist Michael Oakeshott might have said, the task of premiership is akin to flying blind – without reference points, a compass or a safety net.

So why do they do it? What is the job's appeal and why do they seek the office? What do they do when they get there? Do they seek high office for its own sake – as the ultimate political accolade – or to make a difference? Do they readily accept the limitations of their position or actively create their own political 'space' in which to govern? This collection of portraits of premiers and chief ministers in power will suggest answers to these questions.

Do or die premiers – the consolation of minority rule

Currently, the eight sub-national leaders are all from the Labor side of politics. This is the first time since Federation that there have been Labor leaders in each sub-national jurisdiction simultaneously. What does this tell

us? Why have the seemingly unelectable Labor parties of yesteryear now become so electorally dominant at the state and territory level? Not so long ago, under different leaders and in different circumstances, many of these parties were swept out in disgrace by voter backlashes (Brian Burke and Carmen Lawrence in Western Australia, John Cain and Joan Kirner in Victoria, Barrie Unsworth in New South Wales, John Bannon and Lynn Arnold in South Australia, and Wayne Goss in Queensland). The phenomenon of all leaders being from one side of politics has only occurred once before: from May 1969 to May 1970, when non-Labor leaders were in office in the six states and at the federal level.

Accordingly, a study of state and territory leaders today will simultaneously be a study of Labor leadership. Yet, how Labor they are is a moot point. Some of the current crop are accused of heading regimes that are more associated with their personal style and preferences than with traditional Labor values. Bob Carr has remade himself from the bookish ghoul to a political 'colossus' in New South Wales. Peter Beattie has acquired a personal hegemony over Queensland politics, often despite his own party. He has campaigned in his last two elections as TeamBeattie in ads and on his official website – centring attention on himself while eliminating mention of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) entirely. The personalisation of leadership is explicitly addressed in this volume.

Equally true, and not to be dismissed lightly, is the fact that all these leaders have managed to claw themselves up through the local Labor Party factional battlefields. They have risen through the sometimes Byzantine politics of the modern ALP machine. Is there a pattern here, or did they all do it their own way? It is possible that many of these leaders will be around for some time – because of their perceived dominance over state and territory politics and/or because their political opponents are less than competitive. Additionally, as long as the federal coalition led by John Howard and Peter Costello is dominant nationally, the lot of state Labor leaders will be eased, and this may increase the chances of their re-election; they may feel like counterweights to their federal contemporaries.

Paradoxically, many of the current batch of state and territory leaders emerged after long stints in opposition (thankless periods of apprenticeship and heartburn) or initial periods of minority government. But fate smiled on them: they learned how to survive – and sometimes there was

an absence of alternative candidates for the top job. As a group, today's leaders have now led their parties for a combined total of 68 years (eight years on average). Bob Carr served for over seven years in opposition and looked to be heading nowhere when he seized the premiership in April 1995. He has now led the NSW Labor Party for sixteen and a half years. Mike Rann had survived for eight years as opposition leader before he unexpectedly won the March 2002 election in South Australia. Three other leaders served at least three years leading their parties in opposition (Geoff Gallop, Jon Stanhope and Clare Martin). It is hard to find one of the current Labor leaders who was widely expected to win when in opposition – 'stopgap leaders' was one of the kindest epitaphs most of them could have hoped for.

Their elevation to government often started as leadership ordeals, where they had to put together various carefully crafted coalitions to govern their jurisdictions. Four current governments began as tenuous minority governments – Peter Beattie in Queensland in 1998; Steve Bracks in Victoria in 1999; Jon Stanhope in the ACT in 2001; and Mike Rann in South Australia in 2002.² Another two governments came to office with just a one-seat majority – Bob Carr in 1995 and Clare Martin in 2001. Only two began as majority governments: Tasmania's Jim Bacon commanded a comfortable majority (14 to 11) in his first term of 1998, and Geoff Gallop had a seven-seat majority (32 to 25) in Western Australia in 2001. Labor leaders have traditionally been unused to coalition relationships, being majoritarians by instinct and wanting a winner-takes-all outcome. Hence their political skills were tested from the outset. They were apprentice leaders held 'on notice' by party sceptics. Every decision they took or were considering had the potential to bring down their fledgling governments. Yet they came through this formative period and gained strength and electoral support for their efforts. The three eastern seaboard premiers each pulled off landslide victories after an initial shaky term. Why?

Many of the current leaders have remained ashamed of their party predecessors. They have gone to great lengths to dissociate themselves from previous governments (of their own side and/or of their opponents). They peddle 'not' statements such as: 'we are not like the former government' ... Steve Bracks is adamant that he is like neither Jeff Kennett nor John Cain. Peter Beattie constantly makes it clear that his

government is not going to adopt the uncompromising stance of his Labor predecessor Wayne Goss. Geoff Gallop is at pains to distinguish his new accountable style from that of Brian Burke or Carmen Lawrence. Jon Stanhope is anxious not to develop the showy, self-promotional style of his predecessor, Kate Carnell. Mike Rann remains affectionate towards the memory of Don Dunstan (for whom he worked), but clearly does not wish to be compared with former Liberal premiers such as John Olsen, Dean Brown and Rob Kerin.

Interestingly, many of these leaders are self-declared populists, claiming to have a deep affinity with their electorate. They portray themselves as having an almost mystic insight into the wishes of ordinary voters. They espouse policy stances that are overwhelmingly popular even if they are at odds with party doctrine and/or bureaucratic advice. They are no mere ciphers slowly boring away at Weber's hard boards of politics. Being populist also means that these leaders are likely to take public stands against their party or Cabinet/caucus colleagues. They may use their populist orientation to wield greater personal power over their own side of politics – and not remain chained to the party's standard policy-making processes and points of reference.

Moreover, in recent decades, states and territories seem to have increased their policy capacities. State leaders have ridden this wave and become more important political actors, with wider policy interests. They have been active in establishing national policy frameworks and extending their policy horizons. They have their own presidium where new agendas can be debated and resolutions agreed – institutions such as the Council of Australian Governments and the State Leaders' Forum. Premiers in particular regularly present themselves as national statesmen, pontificating on issues as diverse as the Iraq war, Peter Hollingworth's tenure as Governor-General, heroin injecting rooms and republicanism.

Nevertheless, in the context of global pressures to impose greater domestic policy consistency and international compliance, there is debate as to whether state jurisdictions are still relevant. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and with the increased interest in security issues, states have surrendered many of their law and order powers (although they still implement and administer many national decisions). With national policy frameworks gaining in scope and domination, states are increasingly forced into a position of 'agent or provider' to the Commonwealth's